Tucker's Ford Across the Vermilion

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The first settlers in Avoca Township north of Fairbury had no way of crossing the Vermilion River except by fording or walking through a shallow spot with their animals. Tucker's Ford was the early way of crossing the Vermilion River until bridges were built.

The story of Tucker's Ford began with the birth of Nicholas Henry Hefner in 1804 in Virginia. In 1830, he married Mary "Polly" McDowell (1810-1892) in Tippecanoe, Indiana. Their first child, Matilda C. Hefner, was born in 1831 in Indiana.

In 1832, the McDowell family moved to Illinois. They were the first settlers north of what is now Fairbury. They settled about three miles north of Fairbury, near the Avoca Cemetery. Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Hefner and their infant daughter accompanied the McDowell family to this area. In 1840, Nicholas bought land from the federal government in Sections 14 and 15 in Avoca Township.

Mr. Hefner was active in the community and was elected to the position of Sheriff of Livingston County. Nicholas Hefner gave the township the name of Avoca. This term meant meeting the waters since the two branches of the Vermilion River united in this township. In 1840, a post office was created for the village of Avoca. Nicholas Hefner was the first Postmaster of Avoca.

In that early era, there were no bridges across the Vermilion River. Many farmers, including Mr. Hefner, took their wheat to Green's Mill on the Fox River near Ottawa. If the Vermilion was low, they could ford the river with their grain wagon. They would build a raft to transport their wagon across the river if the Vermilion were high.

The 1878 Livingston County history book by Le Baron recounts the experience of one local farmer. This farmer had a wagon drawn by two horses and needed to cross the river. The river had been frozen for some time, and the ice was starting to break. The farmer unhooked the horses from the wagon and placed both horses on a large block of ice. As they started across the river, the giant ice block broke into two pieces. The front legs of the horses were on one chunk of ice, and the back legs on another. The farmer carefully got all four horses' legs on the ice block and paddled them across. The farmer then put the wagon on a large ice block and paddled it across. He hitched the horses back to the wagon, and the farmer continued his business.

Unfortunately, Mr. Hefner, one of the pioneering settlers of Avoca Township, died in 1851 at the age of 46. His wife became a widow at age 41 and had to care for their many children.

Joel Tucker was born in 1800 in Middleton, Ohio. In 1821, Joel married Sarah "Sallie" Ann Stull in Ohio. They started to raise a large family in Tippecanoe, Indiana. In 1844, the Tucker family moved from Tippecanoe to the McDowell area northwest of Fairbury. Unfortunately, Sallie Tucker died in 1853 at the age of 52. Joel Tucker became a widower with a large family of children to raise.

Polly Hefner and Joel Tucker decided to join their two large families, and they married in 1853. In later years, Polly's daughter Matilda C. Hefner married Joel's son Williard Tucker. Polly and Joel Tucker settled on the north end of Section 16 in Avoca Township near the Vermilion River.

The Vermilion River dipped south near the Joel and Polly Tucker farm. It was also shallow in this area and became well known as Tucker's Ford across the Vermilion. It was approximately one mile west and one mile south of the current bridge across the Vermilion on First Street north of Fairbury.

The 1893 Livingston County Atlas records that widow Mary "Polly" Tucker owned the land south of the Vermilion River in Section 16 of Avoca Township. John Edward Bodley, Sr., owned the ground on the north side of the Vermilion.

In June of 1877, the Pantagraph recounted two stories about Tucker's Ford. The first story was about one of the most significant fishing expeditions that ever occurred in the Fairbury area. Seventy-three members of the families of Fairbury businessmen use a seine and hooks to catch 300 to 400 pounds of fish. The freshly caught fish were cooked and served for dinner to the attendees. The Pantagraph also noted everyone had a glorious time without anybody getting in too much "drink bait."

The second article about Tucker's Ford was a McDowell family reunion held at Joel Tucker's residence, seven miles north of Fairbury. Approximately 25 McDowell family members attended the gathering.

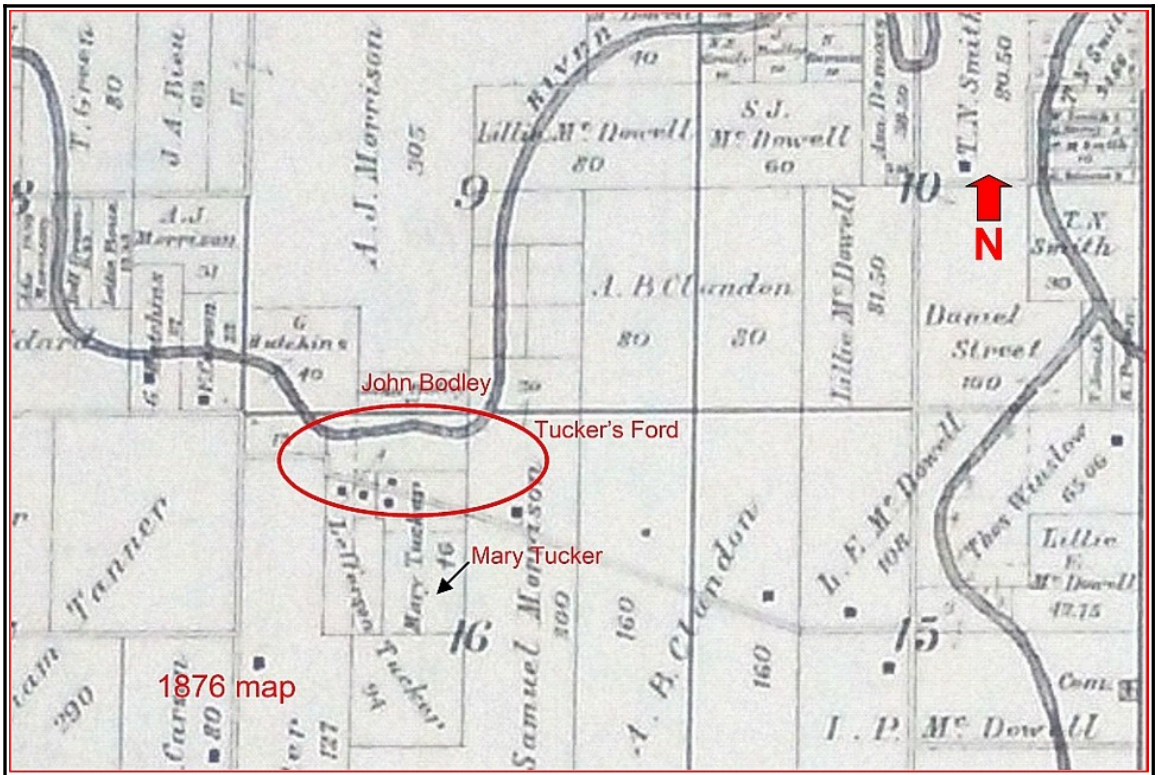
Back in 1891, there were Methodist Churches at Lodemia and Avoca. Reverend Hobbs served both of these churches. In July that year, the Blade recounted that Rev. Hobbs baptized seven converts in the Vermilion River at Tucker's Ford. The Blade also reported that Rev. Hobbs had added 40 additions to his congregational flock since the previous meeting. Since the Vermilion River was relatively shallow at that point, it made sense to conduct baptisms at Tucker's Ford. The Lodemia Methodist church burned down a few hours after the funeral of John Edward Bodley Jr. in 1905. The Avoca Methodist church was torn down in 1935. The lumber was transported and used to construct buildings at East Bay Camp in Lake Bloomington.

Joel Tucker's widow, Polly McDowell Tucker, passed away in 1892 at 81. Joel and Polly Tucker were both buried in the Avoca Cemetery.

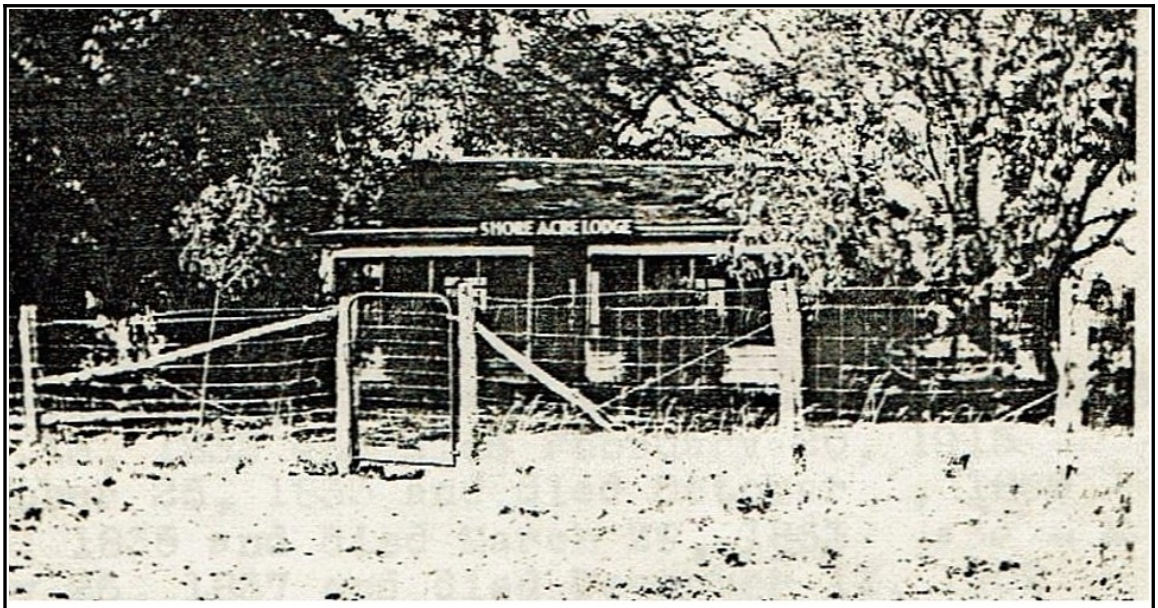
The descendants of Joel Tucker continued to have annual family reunions at Tucker's Ford many years after he died in 1885. One of the last family reunions mentioned in the

Pantagraph occurred in September 1944. That year, 40 descendants met at the Shore Acre Lodge at Tucker's Ford five miles northwest of Fairbury. They recounted that Joel Tucker had previously stopped his covered wagon at this spot over 100 years before.

Eventually, bridges were built over the Vermilion River on First Street north of Fairbury and at McDowell. Once the bridges were built, fords across the Vermilion were no longer needed. Tucker's Ford was a vital transportation feature for farmers in the era before modern bridges.



Location of Tucker's Ford North of Fairbury



Shore Acre Lodge at Tucker's Ford

Tucker's Ford on the Vermilion River Northwest of Fairbury